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SUBJECT: CROATIA'S RIGHT-WING - STILL CONSERVATIVE, BUT LESS OBSESSED WITH NATIONALISM

REF: ZAGREB 1052

**¶1.** (SBU) SUMMARY: In a stunning blow to right-wing politics across Croatia, the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) lost 7 parliamentary seats in the November 25 parliamentary elections. Despite attempts to repackage itself as a mainstream alternative to the dominant Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the HSP has been reduced to a mere symbolic presence in the Croatian Parliament. Only its president Anto Djapic was reelected. Following HSP's election debacle, Djapic offered his resignation, but the HSP leadership decided to wait for a party convention in February to decide on the matter. The HSP's own internal disarray played a major role in its election losses, but it also appears that Croatia's right-wing voters are increasingly concerned with basic conservative issues, rather than nationalistic rhetoric. END SUMMARY.

**¶2.** (SBU) Formerly an extreme right-wing party, the HSP has in recent years sought to transform into a more modern, yet still conservative, alternative to the dominant HDZ. These efforts contributed to the party's success in 2003 when it doubled to eight the number of seats it held in Parliament, and then again in 2005 when it came to power in several cities and counties across Croatia.

In November 2007, however, the party made the 5 percent electoral threshold in just one of the eleven election districts where it ran for parliamentary seats. The very process of moving toward mainstream politics had led the party so close to PM Ivo Sanader's HDZ that the average right-wing voter could see little difference between the HDZ and a reformed HSP.

**¶3.** (SBU) The HSP's collapse was also precipitated by internal disputes. Its two most prominent parliamentarians, Miroslav Rozic and Tonci Tadic, left the party in September, accusing Djapic of being more interested in acquiring political offices than in advancing its policies. HSP's disarray was further aggravated when the city government of Osijek, the largest HSP-led city in Croatia, fell apart over coalition squabbling and accusations of corruption in public procurement.

**¶4.** (SBU) Coupled with the emergence of the center-left Social Democratic Party (SDP) as a legitimate contender to win the election, it appears Croatia's conservative voters decided the HDZ was a more influential and more reliable party. The HSP tried to attack the HDZ with nationalist rhetoric accusing Sanader of "selling-out" for assisting in the capture of ICTY indictee (and HSP hero) Ante Gotovina. But in response right-wing voters simply abstained, or opted for the HDZ's conservative message (no new taxes, a tough line on drugs, support for the Church and Catholic social values) and argument that "a vote for the HSP is a vote for the SDP."

**¶5.** (SBU) COMMENT: It appears nationalist rhetoric in general has declining appeal to Croatian voters. In Eastern Slavonia, the rival nationalist party of Branimir Glavas (reftel) benefited somewhat from HSP's losses, and a independent candidacy by Tadic weakened the

HDZ in Dalmatia. But in other districts around the country, the HSP's decline produced no bounce at all for other parties emphasizing nationalist issues such as denouncing the HDZ for submissiveness to the international community or calling for a halt to Croatia's cooperation with the ICTY. END COMMENT.

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